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HEIDEGGER: PROBLEM AND BACKGROUND OF EXISTENTIALISM

BY KARL LOWITH

Die Heimatlosigkeit wird ein Weltschicksal. Darum ist es nötig, dieses Geschick seingeschichtlich zu denken.—Martin Heidegger

THE basic works of existentialism have not yet been translated. What is generally known about the subject is derived from many secondary channels and from articles about a new philosophy, allegedly of "nihilism," but not from a knowledge of the sources. Moreover, political circumstances play such a role in the selection of, and attention to, contemporary literature and philosophy that the average American student knows more about Jean-Paul Sartre than about Karl Jaspers, and more about Jaspers than about Martin Heidegger of whom Sartre was a pupil. This sequence in the degree of familiarity is politically conditioned, for Sartre is a Frenchman who was engaged in the resistance movement, and Jaspers a German who for ten lonely years was barred from academic activity by the Nazis, while Heidegger, who supported National Socialism in 1933, neither resisted the regime subsequently nor was dismissed from his post during its period of domination.

Since 1945 the fortunes of Jaspers and Heidegger have changed considerably. Jaspers has for the time being the unenviable distinction of being placed in the limelight of the German academic scene, while Heidegger has had to retire into privacy and now enjoys the privilege of being spared such exposure and public responsibility.

I shall not enter here into the discussion of Heidegger's "Nazism" nor into the more comprehensive and intricate question

of a philosopher's social responsibilities.[1] Whatever one may think about these matters, the sequence derived from political circumstance—Sartre, Jaspers, Heidegger—must be reversed with regard to philosophical priority and significance. For Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* appeared in 1927 (Halle), Jaspers' *Philosophie* in 1932 (Berlin), and Sartre's *L'Être et le néant* in 1943 (Paris). Sartre is Heidegger's most original and creative pupil; Jaspers and Heidegger worked out their respective philosophies independently and simultaneously in their lecture courses after the first world war. All three of them exert an influence that can hardly be overestimated. In spite of the many attacks on existentialism, inside and outside Germany, before and after Hitler, existentialism holds its own and for the past twenty years has colored every Continental discussion in philosophy as well as theology. It is the philosophy which seems to express in Germany, France, and Italy the real problems and issues of our historical situation. The only powerful competition existentialism has met so far comes not from other academic schools of philosophy but from the Catholic church and from Marxism. I venture to say, and I shall presently try to substantiate my thesis, that the fashion of existentialism is indeed more than a fashion, for it is shaping, with ultimate logic, the basic mood of modern man's worldly existence. We are all existentialists, some consciously, some willy-nilly, and some without knowing it, because we are all more or less caught in the predicament of being "modern" by living in an epoch of dissolution of former beliefs and certainties. Even those who have never read a line of Heidegger, Jaspers, or Sartre are so familiar with such typical categories of existential philosophy as "contingency" and "finiteness" of our existence, "anxiety" and "care" and all that which Jaspers calls "extreme situations," that they can hardly imagine a normalcy apart from mediocrity.

And yet it is very difficult to say exactly what this "modernity"

[1] See my article, "Les Implications politiques de la philosophie de l'existence chez Heidegger," in *Les Temps modernes* (November 1946), and the critical response to my thesis in the issue of July 1947.

is and when it began to appear. Goethe thought that Balzac was abominably modern and "ultra," presenting in his novels "the ugly, the hideous and depraved" instead of the wholesome. Baudelaire thought that Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* was "profoundly modern." Our grandfathers thought that impressionism was terribly modern and our fathers that Van Gogh was ultramodern. Now, for us, the human comedy of Balzac has become rather antiquated in comparison with the human hell in Dostoevski's novels; poor Madame Bovary's problem no longer impresses us as profoundly modern; impressionism is surpassed by expressionism, and Van Gogh's paintings are realistic compared with those of surrealists. But in spite of the relativity of what a generation feels to be "modern," all these writers and artists still have something in common that distinguishes them sharply from a seventeenth-century man. They are all, to use Goethe's phrase, ultra, beyond, or "ecstatic." They do not represent in their works a human cosmos but fragments of an uncertain frame of reference. Perhaps one could say that modernity begins with the dissolution of a natural and social *order* in which man was supposed to have a definite *nature* and *place,* while modern man "exists," displaced and out of place, in extreme situations on the edge of chaos. Present-day modernity is therefore vastly different from what was debated under this title in the seventeenth century with regard to the relative merits of the "moderns and ancients." The comparison with the ancient classics was a comparison with works of the same kind. Milton, for example, was compared with Virgil, Corneille with Sophocles.[2] Our modernity, which came of age with the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century, is not comparable with what has gone before because it has changed the very standards of comparison. Hence the many prognostications of a decisive change in the constitution of European life and thought during the nineteenth century, by men like Goethe, Baudelaire, Proudhon, Kierkegaard, Marx, Nietzsche, and many

[2] See W. Barrett, *What is Existentialism?,* Partisan Review Series II (New York 1947) p. 54.

minor figures. This change has eventually found its precise philosophical expression in the term "existence" and its altered relation to "essence." To elucidate the problem involved in, and the background behind, those two concepts we shall have to explain, first, Heidegger's concept of existence; second, the relation between essence and existence in the thought of Aristotle, Thomas, and Hegel; and third, the reaction against Hegel's philosophy of essential existence by Schelling, Kierkegaard, and Marx.

Heidegger's Concept of Existence

We shall confine the discussion of existentialism to Heidegger's concept of existence as presented in *Sein und Zeit,*[3] passing over Jaspers' philosophy because Heidegger is more modern and radical. He is more radical because his analysis of Being within the horizon of Time does not, like the "elucidation of existence" by Jaspers, *presuppose,* and then relativize, the objective knowledge of positive science and *aim* at a traditional though relativized metaphysics of objective transcendence. Accordingly, Heidegger's existential introduction to the interpretation of Being as such presents an unbroken unity of thought, starting from the fundamental analysis of man's existence, while Jaspers' philosophy consists of three parts: (1) orientation in the objective world; (2) appeal to existence; (3) search for transcendence. The two latter concepts reflect the traditional ideas of a human "soul" and its relation to "God." What Heidegger calls "world," "existence," and "transcendence" are entirely different. His interpretation of the phenomenon "world" does not presuppose the scientific understanding of the world, for the scientific understanding of Being, as applied to man and the world, is philosophically a problem and not a possible starting point. Likewise Heidegger rejects the whole enterprise of "metaphysics" in the traditional sense of this

[3] Occasionally we shall also refer to *Was ist Metaphysik?* (Frankfurt-am-Main 1929), *Vom Wesen des Grundes* (Halle 1929), and *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit* (Frankfurt-am-Main 1943).

word where it indicates something eternal, infinite, perfect. Instead he proposes to understand man's being in particular and Being in general within the horizon of Time. What Heidegger calls metaphysics is bound up with the structure of man's finite existence in the world. It is metaphysics in an entirely untraditional sense, namely, a "finite metaphysics of finiteness." And since Heidegger neither starts with positive science nor aims at positive metaphysics, the middle concept of Jaspers' philosophy, "existence," also has a different meaning for him. It is true that human existence as understood by Heidegger also oversteps or "transcends" itself, but not toward a perfect Being. Existence transcends itself toward its own world, and nothing else. Heidegger's existentialism is uncompromisingly "worldly," not even this-worldly but simply worldly, without any positive or negative concern about a beyond; and yet it is not at all a positivistic secularism. In the last analysis, the religious positions of Jaspers and Heidegger are even strangely inversed: the intellectual background of Jaspers, who has a certain leaning toward religion and a definite affinity to liberal protestantism, is positive science,[4] while Heidegger, from whose philosophy Sartre has drawn atheistic conclusions, was nurtured by theology and still retains much more of a religious pathos than Jaspers' "philosophical faith," which is no more than a last echo of secularized Christianity in German idealism. Finally, with regard to their styles of thinking: Jaspers retains the Hegelian ambition of embracing the totality of possible levels and attitudes. He built up a system which is in principle finished, though fluid and undulating. Heidegger is cutting through and digging in, and the apodictic form of his diction should deceive no one about the unresolved tensions of an unfinished and still maturing conception.

The following is a bare outline of Heidegger's concept of existence, leaving aside the more appealing and popular aspects of his philosophy, that is, all the concreteness, plenitude, and suggestive-

[4] See J. Collins, "Philosophy of Existence and Positive Religion," in *Modern Schoolman* (January 1946) p. 89.

ness of its phenomenological analyses. I shall concentrate on the bare notion of existence in its relation to essence. Heidegger's startling thesis is that man's nature or essence is nothing else but "existence." What does this mean and imply? Heidegger begins his great work with a quotation from Plato's *Sophist:* "Since, then, we are in a difficulty, please to tell us what you mean when you speak of being; for there can be no doubt that you always, from the first, understood your own meaning, whereas we once thought that we understood it, but now we are in a great strait." Out of this embarrassment that we are constantly handling and apparently understanding Being, but are ignorant of its meaning, Heidegger made the effort of beginning, as it were, from scratch. Several prejudices with regard to the notion of Being obstruct such an attempt. The chief prejudice is that Being is the most general, abstract, and empty of all notions. For there is indeed nothing of which we do not predicate that it "is." God, we say, is; the world is; man is; values are; propositions are true or false. Today is the twenty-first of January, this is a classroom and this is a lecture—and there we are. In each of these different apprehensions of something which "is" we coapprehend vaguely a general character of Being as such. But this general character is not the generality of a genus under which more specific sorts of beings are subsumed. For Being, in its universal and abstract sense, surpasses all the different kinds of real or ideal beings. It is not a particular though more general kind of something real. It seems rather to be nothing. Being as such, therefore, is undefinable by *genus proximum* and *differentia specifica.* The question, "What is Being?" or "What *is* the meaning of 'Is'?" seems to be an impossible and insoluble problem, for the question already implies what is asked for, namely, an "is." How and from where can we then approach Being as such?

We can approach it only if pure Being, or Being as such, is in some way related to a concrete being, though surpassing it. Perhaps Being is not only the most general and empty notion but also something quite individual. This is indeed the case. For there

is among all beings a unique being which alone can question Being as such and thus make ontology possible. A house or a plant or an animal has never asked, "What is Being?" It is man alone who can ask such an extravagant question. And why can and does he ask so? Because he is an exceptional, fatally privileged being, or, in Heidegger's ontological term, a *Da-sein,* a being-there. He is in his real being an ontological being, that is, a being capable of transcending his own and every other concrete being toward Being as such. As a self he can relate himself to other beings, to everything in the world, and to his own being in it, and thereby surpass all these kinds of concrete beings. With the emergence of man or *Da-sein* amidst all other beings there occurs an "inroad" into the totality of beings, which opens the view on Being as such. Man can surpass or transcend every particular being and ask about Being as such because he is the only being which, *in* his being-there, is concerned *with* his being and is thereby open for its possible comprehension.

Despite the sheer factuality of our "being-there" we are not simply extant *(vorhanden),* like a stone, nor are we determined by an alien purpose *(zuhanden),* like a hammer which is what it is as something "to hammer with" and which only man can handle, for the hammer itself has no self and cannot enjoy its own purpose. In distinction from these two other ways of being, the merely extant and the functional being, man has the privilege of being in such a way that he is thrust upon himself as a self, and yet owns his own being. He can, therefore, also withdraw from it, in suicide and sacrifice. Animals which are possessed by their natural being cannot transcend it, neither by taking possession of it nor by withdrawing from it. This kind of Being or rather to-be, which is peculiar to human *Da-sein*—that is, responsibility *to* one's own being, without, however, being responsible *for* being-there—Heidegger calls existence. It is man's way or manner of being-there. Existence is, however, not a fixed quality like being tall or short. It is a constant possibility. We *can* exist in this or that manner, authentically or unauthentically, in an individual or

in an average way. However we choose to be, these possibilities remain inevitably *each one's* own possibilities. Man's *Da-sein,* which chooses and pursues one of his possibilities is always *my* personal or *your* personal existence, amidst and in spite of all sociality. In all his taking care of something and caring for others, man is ultimately concerned with his own being and possibilities, which rest, however, on the sheer fact of his being-there. As such a being he can reflect upon and ask about Being as such, and elaborate a philosophy of Being, or ontology.

Thus we can now understand why the most abstract, impersonal, and general question of ontology is intimately bound up with a most concrete, personal, and specific being. A philosophical analysis of Being can only be worked out on the basis of an existential analysis of man's being; it has to start from a "*fundamental* ontology." It is true that the universal concept of Being transcends every concrete being, but it cannot be grasped unless we reduce the ontological problem methodically to man's existence as the ultimate *source* and also *end* of the ontological interest. To answer the universal question of Being we have to concentrate this transcendent quest in a most singular being, namely, that of the questioner. The claim of beginning without any such presupposition—"standpointless," as it were—is an illusory pretension.

After these preliminary statements Heidegger proceeds to a more detailed analysis of man's being. Man's being, which is concerned with his own being, has *to-be*—that is, he must be; he cannot surrender his being-there to some other being and get rid of it. He is, rather, surrendered or delivered up to himself. He has, therefore, to bear, as long as he exists, the "burden" of existence as an essential character of his being-there. If, says Heidegger, one can speak at all of man's essence, then this so-called essence is implied in the fact that he has *to-be;* in other words, man's essence has to be understood from his existence. It may or may not be correct that man is a rational animal (Aristotle) or an *ens creatum* (Thomas), a creature in the theological sense, or a compound of spirit, soul, and body—whatever his essence may

be, first of all he *is* there, as a self-concerned existence. "The Essence of (man's) *Da-sein* is his Existence." While essence refers to the conceivable *what* I am, existence refers to the factual *that* I am and have-to-be. This *that* precedes in man's existence whatever he is, biologically, psychologically, socially.

Man's existence implies further that he is *in the world.* But the "world" is not an external sum total of all extant beings, nor is it a system of merely functional beings. It is a universal and yet existential structure. Man is not like a stone in the world but is essentially relating himself *to* "his" world. He is constituting and "projecting" the world into which he is thrown and by which he is swayed and permeated. He is from the very outset of his human existence a worldly existence. "To-be-in-the-world" is a fundamental character of man's existence. To have a world means more than to behave within a given environment. It means, rather, to be open for the manifestation of Being as such by "ek-sisting," that is, by being exposed to the totality of being and having to stand such an exposed or "ecstatic" existence. Organic and inorganic nature is alive or lifeless, respectively, but does not exist in the human dimension of a self- and world-transcending existence. And the world itself is not a blind mass of being but a way or state of being. "Cosmos" in Greek philosophy means not simply *physis* but a specific constitution of the natural world, an orderly totality as distinct from a disorderly, chaotic totality of the same beings which, as cosmos, are *kata kosmon,* cosmos-like. And this total state of being is further related to human beings; only to human beings who are awake is the cosmos a "common" world, while in the state of sleep each individual has his own world. The emphasis on the relatedness of world to man became accentuated in the Christian understanding of the world. For St. Paul cosmos is not primarily a cosmic state but directly a state of man—humanity in the state of alienation from God. In both traditions, classic and Christian, cosmos or world transcends the concept of nature. Nature, says Heidegger, cannot elucidate the ontological character of world and of our being in it because

nature is only a kind of being within our world and we encounter it therefore within the analysis of man's being-there. Thus the initial definition of the fundamental being whose essence is absorbed in existence seems to stand firm.

As a pure factuality of worldly existence, man has no wisdom about his *whence* and *whither*. For this very reason he feels all the more intensely the pure fact of his being, the factuality *that* he is, no matter how much he may try to surrender himself to some busyness in order to evade the uneasy consciousness of being ultimately nothing else than a factual self or existence. Heidegger calls this factuality of one's own existence *Geworfenheit,* "being-thrown" into existence. No human *Da-sein* has ever freely decided whether it wants to come into existence. Hence, it is utterly unintelligible why we have to be. Out of this experience man makes many attempts to throw himself out of his being thrown into existence by projecting this and that. The ultimate project *(Entwurf)* which man can and ought to project is, however, the anticipation and appropriation of his death. For only by anticipating and facing resolutely the *end* of a still unfinished existence can a human existence become "whole" and wholly intense. By anticipating death as the final end man acknowledges his final finiteness and ultimate nothingness.

This nothingness of our being-there is revealed primarily in indefinite anxiety. Anxiety is distinct from definite fear of this and that. It is concerned not with particular objects in the world but with the whole of our worldly being-there. In such an anxiety, which may emerge on quite trivial occasions, man suddenly loses his customary hold on the world. The whole of Being seems to drift away into nothing. But this experience of stretching out into nothingness is in itself a positive one, for it gives us the necessary background against which we become aware of Being as such—of the amazing fact "that there is something" and not nothing, "the wonder of all wonders."

Being open-minded to this anxiety and advancing freely toward the inevitable end is the highest test of man's freedom from con-

tingency and at the same time to it. Just because factual existence does not rest upon anything but itself, it is the factual source of a radical freedom, of the freedom to will one's own finiteness and to assent to that fundamental nothingness which pervades all Being for us. Radical freedom, that is, freedom in regard to Being as such, and not only from certain conditions of life, is bound up with the manifestation of nothingness.

This is, very briefly and roughly, the outline of Heidegger's concept of existence. I think it would be very difficult to refute the so-called "nihilism" of existential ontology, on theoretical as well as moral grounds, unless one believes in man and world as a creation of God or in the cosmos as a divine and eternal order—in other words, unless one is not "modern." This does not mean that the problem of nothingness is an invention of existentialism. Like "existence," the "nothing," too, has always been a problem, but in very different contexts with essence and with being.

In Jewish-Christian theology the nothing is an absolute void. It is conceived as the empty and powerless opposite to the omnipotence of God, who creates being out of nothing. In classic philosophy the nothing is the negative borderline of being; it is not positive but merely absence of being or, more precisely, of being-formed or being-shaped. In modern existentialism nothingness is not merely absence of, or contrast to, Being but belongs essentially to Being as such. Moreover, it is the ontological condition of freedom. Thus Heidegger ventures to reverse the classical saying, *ex nihilo nihil fit* (out of nothing nothing can emerge), into the opposite thesis, *ex nihilo omne ens qua ens fit* (out of nothing—that is, from possible nothingness—all being as such emerges). This proposition is anticlassic because it endows the nothing with a creative significance, and it is anti-Christian because it applies the doctrine of divine creation out of nothing to a finite existence. For a finite existence like man the meaning of Being as such becomes manifest only in the face of nothingness. The experience of it reveals the amazing strangeness of Being as such. On account of this experience of Being in the state of

slipping away the question can arise, "Why is there anything at all rather than nothing?" This quest for an ultimate "why" of Being as such motivates also all our secondary questions about the particular causes or reasons of this and that.

The logical evidence of the traditional proposition that "nothing is without cause," the "principle of sufficient reason," rests on the translogical fact that man can ask about the "why" of his own and every being. The possibility, however, of asking "why" rests on the fact that man's existence is not bound up with and contained in itself but is removed from it. Man is a self-transcendent existence which has a certain free play and is therefore capable of thinking and acting in possibilities, in projects, instead of merely accepting given realities. Hence we can ask: why this and *not* that; why thus and *not* otherwise; why is there anything at all and *not* nothing? The possibility of asking "why not" refers to our freedom as the ultimate ground of these transcending questions. But this freedom has a radical limitation. It is the freedom of a contingent and finite existence and therefore finite in itself. The freedom of overstepping or transcending all particular kinds of being, which enables us to ask "why not" is, together with man's existence, an enterprise or "project" which is thrust upon us. We are, as Sartre says, "condemned to freedom." The ultimate ground of our causal question, that is, our freedom, is in itself groundless—or bottomless *(Abgrund),* incapable of grounding freely itself.

All this is certainly modern, but neither classic nor Christian. Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* leaves no doubt that Christian and Greek ontology are no longer acceptable to him. His whole work is intended as an introduction to the "destruction" of the ontological tradition, that is, to a critical re-examination of the original foundations and limitations of the Greek and scholastic notions of Being. The fundamental limitation of Greek ontology is, in regard to the problem of Being, that it understands man's being and Being in general in orientation to the *world* as cosmos and *physis,* and, in regard to the problem of Time, that it takes its

orientation from what is *present* and *always present* or eternal.[5] In other words, Greek thought has no sense for man's exceptional, "ecstatic" existence, and therefore no sense for the future as the primary horizon of all human projects.

The fundamental limitation of medieval ontology is that it has taken over the results of Greek thought without their original motivations and transplanted them into the basic doctrine of creation, according to which all finite being is an *ens creatum* as opposed to God's *ens increatum*. On this theological basis man's essential existence consists in transcending himself toward his creator. This idea of transcending toward a perfect and infinite being subsequently became diluted and secularized. It pervades the whole transcendental philosophy of German idealism and also Jaspers' semi-Christian existentialism.

Against this whole decaying tradition Heidegger ventured to re-examine anew the problem of Being. He nowhere pretends to have solved it, saying explicitly in the last paragraph of *Sein und Zeit* that its only purpose is to kindle the question and to bring into motion what has become stalemated. He concludes his work not with a ready-made answer but with a series of open questions, and he is still on the way—away from the initial pathos of resolute "existentialism"! This "being-on-the-way," which is the strength and honesty but also the weakness and hypocrisy of modern thinking, is not a Christian pilgrimage toward a definite goal but, as with Nietzsche, an adventurous wandering where the wanderer is afraid but also proud of not knowing whither the adventure might lead him.

In view of the earnestness and radicality of Heidegger's enterprise, it was a strange mistake when in the twenties those who disliked existentialism thought that they could dismiss it as a "philosophy of inflation." But even twenty years after the publication of *Sein und Zeit* one could still read in an article in the

[5] See Helene Weiss, "The Greek Conceptions of Time and Being in the Light of Heidegger's Philosophy," in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (December 1941) pp. 173 ff.

New York *Times* (July 6, 1947) the following definition of existentialism: "It was invented by a Nazi, Heidegger; it is a philosophy of nihilism like Nazism, appropriate to the vacuity of German life." Unfortunately, for this definition, existentialism was invented during the Weimar Republic (which offered Heidegger a chair at Berlin University) when the vacuity of German intellectual life was still pretty well filled by a host of other philosophies of "life," "culture," and "values." Existentialism has outlived not only the Weimar Republic but also the Third Reich. It has even gained ascendancy and has its strongest support now in France, the classical country of Cartesian rationalism. The German postwar climate after the first world war did perhaps stimulate, but it could not cause, the rise of existentialism, the germ of which was planted long ago.

The Relation between Essence and Existence in the Thought of Aristotle, Thomas, and Hegel

To estimate the significance of the existentialist innovation in the understanding of existence one has to contrast it with the relation between essence and existence in the philosophical tradition. In some way existence has always been a fundamental problem in man's thought about Being. The real issue is not the birth of an entirely new problem but a new way of posing the same old problem within a different context. What is new in modern existentialism is that the traditional reference of existence to essence is replaced by the absorption of essence into existence.

Aristotle, in Book VI of his *Metaphysics,* discusses the several meanings of Being. All sciences, he says, mark off some particular realm of being without inquiring into Being simply as Being. For example, the science of building presupposes the existence of certain building materials without inquiring into the creativity that brings a building, through the mind of an architect, into existence. Metaphysics, however, seeks the principles and causes of all beings "in so far as they are or exist," while sciences take existence for granted. They also neglect the inquiry into the con-

ceivable essence of their particular realms of being. So far, Aristotle sounds much like Heidegger, or, rather, Heidegger seems to have restated Aristotle. But then Aristotle goes on to say that the neglect of existence and essence are only two aspects of "one and the same omission" and that "the one goes along with the other" for, he says, the inquiry into *what* something is (its essence) also decides *if* it is (its existence). Essence and existence are both manifest to "the same kind of thinking."

These few sentences indicate the limitation of classic ontology. They show that Aristotle, in spite of his emphasis on Being as Being, is not concerned with the sheer factuality of existence in general or with the contingency of human existence in particular, but with essential existence, because "whatness" and "thatness" are inseparable and neither precedes the other. It is true that over against Plato's "idea," Aristotle asserts that the *ousia* or essence is a real substance, but just because he defines it in opposition to Plato his own concept of Being is that of being-something, and in its full sense it is the being of something which has the reason or ground of its being in itself. Accordingly Aristotle explicitly excludes from his considerations whatever is by accident or chance. For, he argues, an accidental or inessential existence cannot become the subject of a rational science. Accidents are innumerable and incalculable; the fortuitous, he says, "is practically a mere name." As an illustration, he points out that a spacious house may be comfortable for a large and rich family but inconvenient for a small and poor family. This is, however, accidental to the essential character of a house. This illustration shows again that the "accidental" which Aristotle has in mind is not the principal accidentality of a whole existence as such, but only the particular accident that may occur to something which already exists essentially. All serious philosophy, he concludes, is either of that which is always what it is, or at least for the most part and as a rule.

Within this sound limitation of Aristotle's thought the existentialist question, "Why is there anything at all rather than noth-

ing?" and the corresponding emphasis on the contingency and factuality of existence could not emerge. It could not, not because Aristotle was a modern positivist but because he was a Greek thinker for whom existence as such—that there is something—was an unquestionable element within the essential structure, order, and beauty of an always existing cosmos without beginning and end, including the existence of rational animals called men. They are distinguished from other beings not by the irrational freedom of sheer willing and projecting, but by the freedom of disinterested contemplation. The highest distinction of man is that he is capable of contemplating this perfect hierarchy of an imperishable universe within which each being has its definite properties, place, and degree of perfection. For Aristotle the ultimate source of philosophical research is "amazement"—not, however, about the strange factuality of Being as such but about the hidden principles of the orderly changes in the visible universe.

The Aristotelian view of the world was taken over by Thomas, but with some important modifications.[6] For Thomas, as a Christian theologian and believer, all being is primarily *ens creatum,* brought into existence out of nothing by the absolutely free will of a transcendent creator. Accordingly, within Christian thought the concept of existence has a definite priority to that of essence, and to that extent Thomas is an "existentialist" or, rather, existentialism is derived from Christian thinking. Its quest for an ultimate why of existence as such, as expressed in Heidegger's question, "Why is there anything at all rather than nothing?" was not asked by Greek philosophy, but is implicit in the story of creation and explicit in existentialism, though apart from creation.

Thomas distinguishes between *ens* or a being and *esse* or to-be, the latter meaning the act of existence. To accentuate existence he speaks of *ipsum esse,* of the very existence of a being. This *esse* or to-be is the verb root of *ens* and *essentia,* of being and essence. An existing being is a *quidditas* or essence, in so far as it is conceivable and definable in regard to what it is. For every-

[6] See E. Gilson, *Le Thomism,* 5th ed. (Paris 1945) pp. 42 ff. and 511 ff.

thing is known by what it is, its essence. But of all created substances nothing is what it is by itself *(ens per se).* Only God is without a cause because he alone exists essentially; his very essence is to-be. Seen in this Christian perspective of creation Aristotle's analysis of the various reasons why a certain being is what it is insufficient. For what Aristotle demonstrates are only the inherent principles of an existing something, but neither does he ask nor can he answer why something is at all. He is not radical, as Thomas and Heidegger are. Prior to a formative principle is the beginning of existence as such. Aristotle's actualizing form is not the first principle of existence; it determines only the completion of a potential existence. On the level of Aristotle one can only inquire into the existence of something already existing. But the first principle of Being is *ipsum esse,* the very to-be, and this is for Thomas not only a most *strange* factuality (as it is for existentialism) but also the most wonderful and *perfect* actuality. To-be is already an indication of perfection, in accordance with the biblical saying that all created things are as such good and perfect, simply by being endowed with existence. This is, of course, the very opposite to the mood of modern existentialism and yet comes very close to it. For if we abstract from God as the only essential existence, modern and Christian existentialism agree in this that all *finite* existence is *not* an essential existence, existing necessarily by itself. For Thomas, too, existence is an exceptional category, undefinable by a "what" or essence. The knowledge of what something is does not yield anything for demonstrating that it is. Thus existence seems to be entirely adventitious, coming from outside, and hence we might conclude—not only with modern existentialists but also with the Arab and Jewish Aristotelians of the tenth and twelfth centuries (Al-Farabi, Algazel, Avicenna, Maimonides) [7]—that existence is a pure accident. Thomas often seems to be of their opinion and yet he criticizes them severely

[7] See Emil L. Fackenheim, "The Possibility of the Universe in Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina and Maimonides," in *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research,* vol. 16 (1946–47).

because to him this apparent accident of existence is the very heart of being. It appears as an accident only if one starts from essence, but if one starts from the whole existing being, then existence reveals itself not only as a different order from essence but also as a far superior order, for without it no *ens* and essence would be. The fact of existence is for Thomas the most "intimate," "profound," and "perfect," though undefinable, determination which includes all the rest.

Thus the existentialist thesis that existence precedes essence can be traced back to Christian thinking from which, however, it is strictly separated by the doctrine of creation. Existentialism is creationism without creator. On the other side, in the perspective of creation finite existence is not only contingent and unjustifiable by itself, but the contingent and finite aspect of existence emerges only within such a transcendent perspective toward a necessary, infinite, and essential being.[8]

This idea of an essential existence persisted in the form of the ontological argument for the existence of God from Anselm to Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz and Wolff. Only Kant destroyed it. He argued that in no case can existence be "picked out" from

[8] Sartre, in *L'Être et le néant* (Paris 1943) pp. 653, 708, 713 ff., 717, 721, draws indeed the ultimate conclusions from the premises of radical existentialism when he asserts that the ideal of pure existence is to become—God! The *pour-soi*, he argues, is always its own deficiency for it lacks the solid self-sufficiency of an *en-soi*. The *pour-soi* emerges only through the appropriation and annihilation of an *en-soi*. But through this assimilating annihilation of an alien world *en-soi* the *pour-soi* projects itself toward the ideal of becoming eventually an *en-soi-pour-soi*. In other words, the groundless freedom of projecting wants to transform itself into a being which is the ground or reason of itself, that is, it projects ultimately the idea of God as *ens causa sui*. But this idea and that project are, according to Sartre, an impossible project and idea. "The fundamental passion of man" is therefore "in vain" and thus it happens that men escape from the absolute and yet bottomless responsibility of their chance-existence "into solitary drunkenness or to the leading of nations." It is true, Sartre says, that man can essentially *ask* for a reason of his contingent existence but this quest implies the perspective toward an essential existence which is the reason of its own being. What man actually *experiences* is the constant and inevitable failure of his attempt to surrender his contingent and bottomless existence to something necessary and grounded in itself. Compare H. Marcuse, "Remarks on J. P. Sartre's *L'Être et le néant*," in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (March 1948) p. 315.

essence. A real God or one hundred real dollars and an imagined God and one hundred imagined dollars are essentially—that is, as to *what* they are—the same. What distinguishes them is not their conceivable essence but the nonrational positivity of existence which is external to essence.

One may doubt whether Kant's criticism of the ontological argument really meets the point of Anselm's demonstration. But the distinction between existence and essence is valid with regard to all finite beings, since the difference between essence and existence is the very mark of finitude, as was already urged by Thomas. After Kant and against him the ontological proof for the existence of God became re-established by Hegel, on the basis of Aristotle, though in the service of a Christian philosophy of religion. Like Aristotle, Hegel starts from the identity or, rather, the togetherness of factual existence and conceivable essence, of Being and Thought, excluding therefore, as did Aristotle, the accidental, the chance-existence from the interest of metaphysical science. He defines the real as the result of a dialectical "unity of essence and existence," of the "inner" essence and "external" existence. Beings which do not attain to such a congruence are, according to Hegel, "insignificant," "trivial," "casual" existences about which philosophy need not trouble itself. Having thus excluded the contingent from the interest of knowledge Hegel extends his definition of reality to all beings which have a "true" or "real" existence in the emphatic sense of this word. There is, according to Hegel, no real existence which is not essential and necessary; there is no reality—neither in nature nor in history—which is not reasonable, and no reason which is not real. Hence his bold confidence that philosophical reason can penetrate the whole universe and make it intelligible to us. This extension of the unity of reality and reason, of being and thought, of existence and essence, to every "true" being implies that nothing in this world is absolutely finite and thereby split into existence and essence. Everything real participates, on different levels, in the infinite, the absolute, the divine.

On the basis of the Jewish-Christian distinction between created and uncreated being, between the finite and the infinite, but with the conceptual means of Aristotle, Hegel overdid what was sound in classic philosophy and perverted what was genuinely Christian. For the thesis of the structural unity of essence and existence serves him as a theodicy, as a justification of God in the world of nature and history. What, according to Thomas and Christian theology in general, is an ontological privilege of God—namely, to have an essential existence—is, according to Hegel's confusion of Aristotelian metaphysics and Christian theology, valid for every being which can reasonably and emphatically be said "to be." Reality is everywhere the manifestation of an existing *"logos,"* a concept in which the Greek *nous* is inextricably confounded with the *logos* of the New Testament.

Opposed to this Hegelian "reconciliation" of conceivable essence and factual existence, of reason and reality, thought and being, there emerged in the 1840's the many-sided attacks on Hegel's philosophy and on philosophy as such by Schelling, Kierkegaard, Feuerbach, and Marx. All of them were anti-Hegelians and, with the exception of Schelling, therefore Hegelians. They insisted, with different aims and in opposite directions, on the factual, naked, "unforethinkable" positivity of sheer existence as opposed to Hegel's philosophy of rational reality or essential existence.

Schelling, Kierkegaard, and Marx

When Schelling in his later period distinguished between positive and negative philosophy, claiming the positive one for himself and accusing Hegel of having been negative, he meant that reason can only reach the ideal essence of things, their possibility or that which can be, but never any positive, that is, positively posited, existence. Hegel, he says, hypostatized the rational concept of what something is to a fake-existence, simulating in his dialectical movements of thought the real. He has thus transformed all living reality into a "desert of Being." Rational philosophy is nega-

tive with regard to existence because reality cannot be anticipated by thought. It is "unforethinkable"; it can be grasped only "empirically," by metaphysical empiricism. A true philosophy of reality has to begin with the presupposition of accidental existence, the *geradezu Existierende,* the *ipsum esse* of Thomas. Reality cannot be thought out; it comes into existence, and to reach a philosophical understanding of it, it is first of all necessary to "tear oneself away" from the blind fact of existence. "The whole world is such an unforethinkable, blind existence."

The pupils of Hegel who listened to Schelling's Berlin lectures in which he announced his program of a new age of philosophy, even of religion, were as much impressed as the pupils of Husserl who listened, thirty years ago, in Freiburg to Heidegger and turned away from Husserl's theory of *epoche,* of "bracketing" real existence in order to grasp the pure essence of things. In Schelling's audience were Russian and German Hegelians, and society; among them were Kierkegaard, Friedrich Engels, Bakunin, and Jacob Burckhardt. Since most of the audience expected a revolutionary tendency they were disappointed when Schelling developed his scholastic doctrine of *Potenzen,* aiming at a philosophy of mythology and revelation. Schelling's last academic activity was the first important step toward a break with Hegel's reconciliation of reason and reality, of essence and existence, and a new beginning after Hegel's conscious consummation of the "history of the concept," that is, of the whole European philosophical tradition.

The most important and influential "existentialists" among the next generation were Kierkegaard and Marx. Neither of them directed the philosophical tradition into new channels, as did Schelling, but they opposed, together with Hegel's system, the metaphysical enterprise as such. If modern philosophers have a bad conscience in the pursuit of their theoretical profession,[9] it is mainly due to Kierkegaard's and Marx's radical criticism of phi-

[9] See H. Arendt, "What is Existenz Philosophy?" in *Partisan Review* (Winter 1946) p. 40.

losophy as such and to their practical tendencies. We have lost Hegel's confidence that reality cannot resist the power of thought and concept.

What Kierkegaard and Marx were concerned with was not disinterested speculation about universal structures, but individual and social practice, or, more precisely, ethical and political action with regard to the religious and political conditions of contemporary human existence. For Kierkegaard philosophy became reduced to the psychological analysis of the inner stages of life, for Marx to the social-economic analysis of the external conditions of production. Both emphasized, though in opposite directions, the naked fact of our personal and social existence. They understood the human world of the nineteenth century as determined by commodities and money (Marx), and the individual of the *fin du siècle* as permeated by irony, boredom, and despair (Kierkegaard). Hegel's consummation of the history of the spirit became for both an end, preparatory to an extensive social revolution and an intensive religious reformation, respectively. Hegel's "concrete mediations" turned for both into abstract "decisions," either for the old Christian God (Kierkegaard) or for a new social world (Marx). Hence a theory of social practice and a reflection upon inner action replace Hegel's Aristotelian belief in the supreme dignity of pure contemplation. Kierkegaard and Marx both turn Hegel's reconciliation of state with society and church into a radical criticism of the capitalist world and of secularized Christianity, thus destroying together from two opposite ends the world of the Christian bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century.

The philosophical foundation of their radical criticism is to be found in their relation to Hegel's basic concept of reality as "unity of essence and existence." Protesting against the chapter on "Reality" in Hegel's *Logic,* Kierkegaard, like Schelling, contends that real reality is inseparable from that which is by accident and therefore cannot be assimilated and comprehended by an ontological logic. The most intimate character of reality is its contingency or, in religious terms, existence as such is a "miracle," the

unexplicable miracle that there is something, in particular that I am there, here and now. This fact is, according to Kierkegaard, the only real "interest" of metaphysics and upon this interest speculative metaphysics cannot but wreck itself. Logically Hegel might be right in asserting that the pure, abstract concepts of being and nothing are identical; in reality they are, however, totally different. The real reality, says Kierkegaard, and Heidegger followed him in this, is "to be interested in or concerned with factual existence." Existential reality is an *inter-esse* or in-between the hypothetical unity of being and thought. The fundamental question, therefore, is not *what is* but *that* I am. "My life has been brought to an *impasse,* I loathe existence, it is without savor, lacking salt and sense. . . . One sticks one's finger into the soil to tell by the smell in what land one is: I stick my finger into existence—it smells of nothing. Where am I? Who am I? How came I here? What is this thing called the world? What does this world mean? Who is it that has lured me into the thing, and now leaves me there? Who am I? How did I come into the world? Why was I not consulted, why not made acquainted with its manners and customs. . . ? How did I obtain an interest in this big enterprise they call reality? Why should I have an interest in it? Is it not a voluntary concern? And if I am to be compelled to take part in it, where is the director? I should like to make a remark to him." [10]

Marx's criticism of Hegel's reconciliation of essence with existence is very different from that of Kierkegaard. Even as a "materialist" Marx remained a Hegelian idealist, for his ideal of a communist society in which freedom is realized is, in principle, nothing else but the "realization" of Hegel's principle of the unity of essence and existence. The communist society, as conceived by Marx, realizes the unity of reason and reality, of general essence and individual existence . In a perfect communist commonwealth each individual has his human essence realized as a common existence. In consequence of his acceptance of Hegel's principle,

[10] Kierkegaard, *Repetition* (Princeton 1941) p. 114.

Marx could say that Hegel is not to blame for having asserted the reality of reason but for having neglected the practical task of its realization through change and criticism. Instead of criticizing theoretically and changing practically the whole established reality of servitude and unreason for the sake of freedom and reason, Hegel accepted the results of our political, social, economic, and religious history as reasonable in themselves. From the critical and revolutionary standpoint of Marx such acceptance of the existent is "crassest materialism"—and Marxism purest idealism! And since Marx believed in the possibility of an empirical unity of essence and existence, he is not in the line of modern existentialism which has its name from the reduction of essence into existence.

With this rebellion of Marx and Kierkegaard against Hegel's synthesis modern existentialism begins, so far as an immediate historic filiation can be traced. Actually, modern existentialism began as early as the seventeenth century, with the Cartesian revolution in the conception of the world and its impact upon Pascal's thought about man's condition in it.

Considering the long and laborious historical process that was required to produce eventually those terms which are now popular slogans, it would be extremely superficial to think of modern existentialism as the mere product of a particular German situation.

If there is a historical and theoretical alternative at all to modern existentialism, one has only the choice of understanding the world and man's place in it either as an immutable natural order—that is, with the eyes of Greek contemplation—or as divine creation—that is, with the eyes of Jewish and Christian faith. Either choice would be indeed persuasive since one cannot wish to remain forever nailed on the cross of contingency, absurdity, and total displacement. But choosing between the one or the other "project" or *Weltentwurf* would still be an existential attitude and decision, and therefore contradictory to the nature of the chosen world-view. For neither of them is a mere project of

human choice and decision. The one is revealed and intelligible only to faith; the other, too, is revealed, though not by historical revelation but in and by nature itself to the nature of man. We cannot choose not to be modern, if it is true that modernity has, since Descartes, rested on the choice of a standpoint and viewpoint. We would have to overcome in principle the modern attitude as such toward the whole of Being if we are to overcome existentialism. This is precisely the direction in which Heidegger is now transforming and reversing the problem of "Being and Time" and the reason why he rejects, together with the traditional distinction of essence and existence, Sartre's existentialism, his own, but natural, child.[11] As long as we do not even intend to subject modern man and the modern world to a radical criticism, that is, to one affecting their coordinate principles, we remain existentialists, capable of asking the most radical question, "Why is there anything at all rather than nothing?"—but constitutionally incapable of answering it.

[11] Heidegger, *Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit* (Berne 1947) p. 72 f.

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